

## Last Letter

What happened that night? Your final night.  
Double, treble exposure  
Over everything. Late afternoon, Friday,  
My last sight of you alive.  
Burning your letter to me, in the ashtray,  
With that strange smile. Had I bungled your plan?  
Had it surprised me sooner than you purposed?  
Had I rushed it back to you too promptly?  
One hour later—you would have been gone  
Where I could not have traced you.  
I would have turned from your locked red door  
That nobody would open  
Still holding your letter,  
A thunderbolt that could not earth itself.  
That would have been electric shock treatment  
For me.  
Repeated over and over, all weekend,  
As often as I read it, or thought of it.  
That would have remade my brains, and my life.  
The treatment that you planned needed some time.  
I cannot imagine  
How I would have got through that weekend.  
I cannot imagine. Had you plotted it all?

Your note reached me too soon—that same day,  
Friday afternoon, posted in the morning.  
The prevalent devils expedited it.  
That was one more straw of ill-luck  
Drawn against you by the Post-Office  
And added to your load. I moved fast,  
Through the snow-blue, February, London twilight.  
Wept with relief when you opened the door.  
A huddle of riddles in solution. Precocious tears  
That failed to interpret to me, failed to divulge  
Their real import. But what did you say  
Over the smoking shards of that letter  
So carefully annihilated, so calmly,  
That let me release you, and leave you  
To blow its ashes off your plan—off the ashtray  
Against which you would lean for me to read  
The Doctor's phone-number.

My escape  
Had become such a hunted thing  
Sleepless, hopeless, all its dreams exhausted,  
Only wanting to be recaptured, only  
Wanting to drop, out of its vacuum.

Two days of dangling nothing. Two days gratis.  
Two days in no calendar, but stolen  
From no world,  
Beyond actuality, feeling, or name.

My love-life grabbed it. My numbed love-life  
With its two mad needles,  
Embroidering their rose, piercing and tugging  
At their tapestry, their bloody tattoo  
Somewhere behind my navel,  
Treading that morass of emblazon,  
Two mad needles, criss-crossing their stitches,  
Selecting among my nerves  
For their colours, refashioning me  
Inside my own skin, each refashioning the other  
With their self-caricatures,

Their obsessed in and out. Two women  
Each with her needle.

That night  
My dellarobbia Susan. I moved  
With the circumspection  
Of a flame in a fuse. My whole fury  
Was an abandoned effort to blow up  
The old globe where shadows bent over  
My telltale track of ashes. I raced  
From and from, face backwards, a film reversed,  
Towards what? We went to Rugby St  
Where you and I began.  
Why did we go there? Of all places  
Why did we go there? Perversity  
In the artistry of our fate  
Adjusted its refinements for you, for me  
And for Susan. Solitaire  
Played by the Minotaur of that maze  
Even included Helen, in the ground-floor flat.  
You had noted her—a girl for a story.  
You never met her. Few ever met her,  
Except across the ears and raving mask  
Of her Alsatian. You had not even glimpsed her.  
You had only recoiled  
When her demented animal crashed its weight  
Against her door, as we slipped through the hallway;  
And heard it choking on infinite German hatred.

That Sunday night she eased her door open  
Its few permitted inches.  
Susan greeted the black eyes, the unhappy  
Overweight, lovely face, that peeped out

Across the little chain. The door closed.  
We heard her consoling her jailor  
Inside her cell, its kennel, where, days later,  
She gassed her ferocious kupo, and herself.

Susan and I spent that night  
In our wedding bed. I had not seen it  
Since we lay there on our wedding day.  
I did not take her back to my own bed.  
It had occurred to me, your weekend over,  
You might appear—a surprise visitation.  
Did you appear, to tap at my dark window?  
So I stayed with Susan, hiding from you,  
In our own wedding bed—the same from which  
Within three years she would be taken to die  
In that same hospital where, within twelve hours,  
I would find you dead.

Monday morning  
I drove her to work, in the City,  
Then parked my van North of Euston Road  
And returned to where my telephone waited.

What happened that night, inside your hours,  
Is as unknown as if it never happened.  
What accumulation of your whole life,  
Like effort unconscious, like birth  
Pushing through the membrane of each slow second  
Into the next, happened  
Only as if it could not happen,  
As if it was not happening. How often  
Did the phone ring there in my empty room,  
You hearing the ring in your receiver—  
At both ends the fading memory  
Of a telephone ringing, in a brain  
As if already dead. I count  
How often you walked to the phone-booth  
At the bottom of St George's terrace.  
You are there whenever I look, just turning  
Out of Fitzroy Road, crossing over  
Between the heaped up banks of dirty sugar.  
In your long black coat,  
With your plait coiled up at the back of your hair  
You walk unable to move, or wake, and are  
Already nobody walking  
Walking by the railings under Primrose Hill  
Towards the phone booth that can never be reached.  
Before midnight. After midnight. Again.  
Again. Again. And, near dawn, again.  
At what position of the hands on my watch-face

Did your last attempt,  
 Already deeply past  
 My being able to hear it, shake the pillow  
 Of that empty bed? A last time  
 Lightly touch at my books, and my papers?  
 By the time I got there my phone was asleep.  
 The pillow innocent. My room slept,  
 Already filled with the snowlit morning light.  
 I lit my fire. I had got out my papers.  
 And I had started to write when the telephone  
 Jerked awake, in a jabbering alarm,  
 Remembering everything. It recovered in my hand.  
 Then a voice like a selected weapon  
 Or a measured injection,  
 Coolly delivered its four words  
 Deep into my ear: 'Your wife is dead.'

What did happen that Sunday night?  
 Your last night? Or what I remember of  
 Doubtful to my last sight of you  
 Burning your farewell letter to me  
 As if you had not meant it  
 Yet with that same smile. As if you had meant  
 Something different.  
 Had it reached me some time you planned?  
 Had you thought out a plan? To drop me  
 Into a trouble not escapable  
 Of what was preparing for me? If it had reached me  
 Saturday morning as it should have - by then  
 You would have reached from me. You would have reached  
 From behind those simple closing words  
 Of your farewell note.  
 Into the mystery of this weekend ~~was~~  
~~I cannot imagine~~ ~~the mystery of this weekend~~ ~~was~~  
~~I cannot imagine~~ ~~the mystery of this weekend~~ ~~was~~  
 How I could have got through these two days  
 Two days of having lost you  
 Of knowing you dead - as I would have imagined -  
 Would have tried no help from at your doorstep -  
 How I could have got through these two days  
 Of my worn-out escape.  
 I do believe it. I believe you know it.  
 But the note reached me too soon. That is  
 You fooled it. Friday afternoon.

